

CHILDREN IN THE WAR ZONE OF UGANDA

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INTRODUCTION

In March, 2004 I was asked by British Executive Service Overseas – BESO to go to Uganda to assist with the development of the Kampala Kids' League. This already eminently successful organization which operated out of school sports leagues for a over 6000 boys and girls aged 4 to 14 years from schools, orphanages and street organizations was being asked by other districts in the country to take its services to them.

It was while visiting the northern town of Gulu in preparation for my work with KKL that I encountered the devastating effects of the eighteen year old 'war' between the Ugandan Government and the Lord's Resistance Army, LRA where children are kidnapped, enslaved and turned into child soldiers to assist in the terrorising of their own communities and the struggle against the government forces.

AFRICA

It was in an attempt to understand Africa just a little – this was only my second visit to the continent – I relied heavily on my son Roger, formerly BBC correspondent in Dar-es-Salaam and now freelancing in Ethiopia who joined me in the visit to Gulu. I also found the writings of Ryszard Kapuscinski, the Pole who lived in Africa on and off for 40 years and who was present for so many of the formative moments in the twentieth century history of many African countries, utterly compelling and informative.

WHAT HAPPENED IN UGANDA

In the last 18 years for the Achole and Langi peoples living in the north and north east of Uganda where it borders Sudan and the particular scourge of President Amin's catastrophic time in power, there has been first an erosion and now a virtual destruction of their culture. It is ironic that in all the bloody turmoil which has been Uganda's fate since its independence from Britain in 1962 with Presidents Milton Obote and Idi Amin, the last eighteen years under President Yoweri Museveni have been relatively peaceful for almost everyone except the Achole and the Langi peoples. Museveni himself though was not averse to the use of child soldiers as he made his assault on Kampala to secure power.

WHAT IS HAPPENING IN NORTHERN UGANDA NOW

These children of the Acholi and the Langi as young as nine years old are abducted daily from their villages and forced by the LRA to act as child soldiers and, in the case of many of the girls, as sex slaves to the LRA commanders.

They are required to carry twice their own body weight in grenades, rifles, pistols, land mines water and food over long distances in the bush in and out of southern Sudan where the LRA often 'rests' after a raid.

One woman with whom I later worked in connection with the Kampala Kids' League told me that she had been abducted at the age of none and until she was fourteen years old when she escaped she had to follow orders to kill other children or face being killed herself. She cannot remember how many people she had killed during this period. She now works to free Acholi women from their plight.

In Gulu I spent time witnessing the work of the Noah's Ark Night Shelter where 24 year old Annette Kurui, a Kenyan trained social worker managed up to 3000 children each night as they arrived from their villages to seek safety from the clutches of the LRA. With just a handful of assistants and shelters built by UNICEF, blankets and scant electricity, a sole army patrol on one of the perimeter fences and no provision for the feeding of children Annette exuded an enviable calm and provided just one respite centre from the cruel reality which lies beyond the town boundaries in the villages and in the desperately unsafe camps for displaced persons into which villagers have been herded against their wishes by the Ugandan Government. On the day we were in Gulu, the President had flown into one such camp outside Lira where a massacre of several hundred people had been executed by the LRA just the day before.

It was into this daily mayhem and in the more peaceful districts of Uganda too that the KKL is planning to bring not trauma counselling, not food aid but football. The 6000 kids already playing weekly in the best organized youth sports league in Africa, twice winners of the Gothia World Cup under 13's tournament in Sweden, beating both Russia and England are such an inspiration and source of pride to the whole country and, in particular, to the children of the war zone. Everyone who can help make this flood of football happen for some of the 24,000 children who regularly flee their homes for the safety of the night shelters in Gulu, Soroti and Lira is being entreated to do something useful.

The UN through UNICEF is there; the Ugandan Army is being pressurized to make safe havens for sport. Major global and more local sponsors are attracted to the prestige offered them by the success already achieved by the young sports boys and girls of the Kampala Kids' League now spreading infectiously though cautiously throughout the country.

CONCLUSION

In this example of attempting to make a difference which is the real reason many of us go places – quietly, without any real mandate other than an invitation to utilise our experience and goodwill, I suggest to you that to tolerate the situation I found in Uganda is equal to abandoning it and the children who are suffering and all too often dying because of it.

I am under no illusion about just how infinitesimal is our contribution to the bigger picture of this war and the many others in Africa and beyond where child soldiers are enslaved and brutalised. There is though, in my view, more than just a point of principle to be made.

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David Dean OBE and Russian Otlichnik 1992 (distinguished educator- the first of two foreigners to be recognised in this way, for his contribution to the development of Russian special education) was founder and for 17 years, Principal of Raddery School in Scotland. He is now a consultant promoting effective therapeutic environments for young people and recently has been working with British Executive Service Overseas (BESO), The Ecologia Trust, and The State University of St Petersburg contributing to work in Russia, Romania and Uganda.